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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000435

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SUBJECT: UN AGREES THAT SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS EXIST IN
CENSUS UNDERWAY THROUGHOUT COUNTRY

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 409

Classified By: Amb. Joseph LeBaron, Reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

(C) Key Points

-- The UN and its western partners, including US Embassy reps, spent much of a recent UN meeting on electoral assistance issues discussing current census problems, particularly the difficulties Black African Mauritians are having registering in southern Mauritania.

-- The UN System Coordinator commented that Afro-Mauritians clearly are facing barriers to their participation in the census. She added that reaching the international standard for such a census (at least 80% of all eligible voters counted) is not the whole point, especially if the 20 percent not counted are all Afro-Mauritians. That would be unacceptable to the UN, the System Coordinator, Cecile Molinier, said.

-- The transitional government, with AU assistance, will hold a roundtable April 25 to discuss donor support of the electoral process. Japan is expected to announce a contribution to the Basket Fund, and Egypt will likely announce a contribution to the Electoral Commission.

(C) Comments

-- The upcoming roundtable could be an excellent venue for raising concerns about the census, especially if the results of the UN mid-point evaluation are available by then.

-- Embassy will continue closely coordinating with the UN, the EU, and European embassies on efforts to get the transitional government and the independent electoral commission to improve the census and voter registration program in the south.

-- At this point, we are not optimistic that the transitional government will take action, despite the rising concern in the international community, since there appears to be little domestic pressure on the government or the electoral commission to do something.

-- Many Moors appear to believe that the reportedly extensive illegal immigration from West Africa requires their government to be doubly cautious and skeptical about claims of Mauritanian nationality by Black Africans in the south. We disagree.

End Key Points and Comments.

11. (C) Representatives of partners for the UN Basket Fund Steering Committee met April 7 to discuss preparations for the first official Steering Committee meeting scheduled for April 20. The group, which included UN, EU, French, Spanish, German, and US representatives, discussed the addition of Mauritanian representatives to the committee, proposed Basket Fund allocations, and procedures for interaction with the media, political parties, and civil society. (Though invited to participate in the meeting, because the U.S. and the Germans have not yet contributed to the basket fund, we are not official members of the Steering Committee.) While not on the agenda, more than half the meeting was dedicated to the current census problems, particularly the difficulties of Afro-Mauritanian registration in the south (reftel).

CONSENSUS ON CENSUS PROBLEMS

12. (C) After PolOff Morris briefed the group about his recent reftel visit to southern Mauritania, the DCM at the French Embassy, Marc Flattot, said that a team from his embassy had recently visited a separate region in the south and had "found exactly the same thing." "We heard numerous

NOUAKCHOTT 00000435 002 OF 003

complaints from Afro-Mauritanians unable to get their ID card...and of villages the electoral commission had never visited," Flattot said, adding that "political parties were also completely absent from these areas." The deputy EU ambassador added that his team was also aware of "widespread problems" in the south.

13. (C) Discussion then turned to the recent census registration figures provided to the UN by the National Independent Electoral Commission (reftel). "We are highly suspicious of the accuracy of these figures," Flattot said, clarifying that "while the numbers of those registered to date may be correct, the estimate of total eligible voters and the figures of the number of people without ID cards are both suspect." The German Embassy DCM, Christian Sedat, asked "where did the figures of total eligible voters come from?" "If they were based on the last census, then they likely don't account for all Mauritanians," he said. (Note: Through other statements it was clear that by "all Mauritanians," Sedat was insinuating that Afro-Mauritanians were likely undercounted in the past census and were thus not accurately represented in these estimates. End note.)

14. (C) UN Principal Technical Advisor Mathieu Bile Bouah acknowledged that he was aware of some registration problems in "certain areas of the south." He added that he "did not know how widespread the problems were," but said "there appeared to be barriers to Afro-Mauritanians participating in the census in certain southern regions." In responding to the concerns about the electoral commission's census registration figures, Bile agreed that the figures were "suspect," but added that "the upcoming mid-term assessment will provide us with more credible figures."

15. (C) UN System Coordinator Cecile Molinier summarized the group's position by saying that "we all agree that Afro-Mauritanians are facing barriers to their participation," adding that "we need to join together in telling the government that these problems exist and that they must be addressed."

¶6. (C) Molinier then raised the issue of the UN,s upcoming audit of the census and voter lists, saying that "reaching the 80 percent international standard is not the whole point, but also what that 80 percent looks like." "If the 20 percent not included are all Afro-Mauritanian, that is unacceptable, and we will tell the ministers and electoral commission that when we meet with them."

¶7. (C) Molinier said she believes that general public support for the census process was beginning to wane. "In the press coverage I've been reading and my conversations with political parties and members of civil society, I feel like public perception is turning against the census," she said, adding that "this could risk damaging the public,s perception of the credibility of elections." Molinier concluded the point by stating that "we are convinced that the electoral commission must ensure the credibility of the (census and electoral) process...and we must help them in this effort."

STEERING COMMITTEES IRONS-OUT DETAILS

¶8. (C) The Steering Committee decided it would seek "participation" form political parties and civil society on the committee, as well as ask the government to propose Steering Committee member representatives from the Ministries of Interior and Finance.

¶9. (C) The committee presented a proposal for distributing the 2,295,000 Euros currently slated for the Basket Fund, with 170,000 for the public media, 340,000 for the private media, 850,000 for political parties, and 935,000 for civil society organizations. The committee also presented several conditions groups must fulfill before being eligible for Basket Funds, but the committee agreed that it would work with "any actor that satisfied these requirements." "We understand why groups like NDI have selected a smaller group of political parties to work with, but as the UN, we must be

NOUAKCHOTT 00000435 003 OF 003

seen as working openly and fairly with all actors...this includes political parties, civil society and the press," Barranca said, with Molinier adding that "we must be objective."

DONOR ROUNDTABLE TO BE HELD APRIL 25

¶10. (C) The AU has announced its support for an April 25 roundtable in Nouakchott hosted by the transitional government, designed to mobilize donors to fund the electoral process. Akihiro Takazawa, head of the Economic Cooperation at the Japanese Embassy in Japan told DCM Koutsis April 12 the Japan will likely announce a contribution of up to USD 1 million to the Basket Fund during the roundtable. He said this was a change of policy for Japan, which had originally considered a bilateral donation. On the same day the Egyptian DCM said that Egypt plans to announce a bilateral contribution of 100,000 EP (approx. USD 18,000) to the electoral commission.
LeBaron